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From: Jim Moran
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I wanted to bring to your attention the opinion piece below by Dania Thafer, the Executive Director of the Gulf International Forum, which was in today's *Washington Post*. It offers her thoughts on the importance of the Shura Council (legislative) elections in Qatar. Note that today, the Amir of Qatar appointed the remaining one-third of members to the Council, including women.

Qatar's first elected parliament may have more power than other Persian Gulf legislatures. Here's why.

The Washington Post

"The election represented the first major step for broader political participation in Qatar, and the Shura Council maintains relatively strong legislative powers in comparison with the other Persian Gulf monarchies. It remains to be seen how the low-key political culture in Qatar will change, or what role the council will play in Qatari policymaking."

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Qatar's first elected parliament may have more power than other Persian Gulf legislatures. Here's why.

The elected-appointed legislator ratio is one key indicator of parliamentary power

By Dania Thafer

Today at 6:00 a.m. EDT



On Oct. 2, Qatar held its first Shura Council election, becoming the fifth Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country to hold elections for a national parliament. Many Qataris voted along affiliated tribal and familial lines, with 63.5 percent of eligible voters turning out to choose among 233 candidates, including 26 women.

Who won, and what happens now? Thus far, it's an all-male council, with male candidates winning the 30 single-member district elected seats. Many of the newly elected are business elites and retired high-ranking government officials. Qatar's emir, who previously appointed all the legislators, will appoint the remaining 15 members, potentially changing the gender and demographic distribution of the final council.

The election represented the first major step for broader political participation in Qatar, and the Shura Council maintains relatively strong legislative powers in comparison with the other Persian Gulf monarchies. It remains to be seen how the low-key political culture in Qatar will change, or what role the council will play in Qatari policymaking.

How does Qatar compare?

GCC legislatures may appear to be similar, but their constitutional power can vary. Qatar's Shura Council appears to have moderately strong legislative powers, putting it at a midpoint between an often-deadlocked parliament in Kuwait and other GCC representative assemblies that have minimal legislative authority.

A number of factors can serve as indicators for parliamentary power: the share of elected members, the council's autonomy to legislate, the ability to undertake a vote of no confidence for government ministers, and the relative proportion of elected vs. appointed members of parliament.

The elected/appointed legislator ratio is one key indicator of parliamentary power — that's because more appointees means a bill will probably require more government buy-in to pass. Of the GCC councils, Kuwait's National Assembly has the lowest proportion of appointed seats at 23 percent, while Saudi Arabia's Consultative Council sits at the other end of the spectrum, with all seats appointed. Bahrain's National Assembly, the Council of Oman and the Federal National Council of the United Arab Emirates have an even split between elected and appointed legislators. Qatar falls in the middle, with two-thirds of members elected and one-third appointed.

The degree of a legislature's autonomy to legislate is linked to its constitutional power to pass and, more importantly, to block bills. Kuwait's National Assembly has long held constitutional authority to pass and block legislation. The National Assembly has blocked a number of government-initiated pieces of legislation, most notably attempts by the government to gain political participation for women.

If a country's constitution allows the parliament to block legislation, that's unlikely to happen in parliaments with half or more of the members appointed as government loyalists. For example, according to [Article 85](#) in Bahrain's constitution, if the appointed upper house and the elected lower house disagree, the measure would require a majority vote by the two houses to pass. That makes blocking legislation highly unlikely if half the voting members are almost guaranteed to favor the government position.

On paper, Qatar's 45-seat Shura Council, with 30 elected seats, would appear to have more leeway than Bahrain's legislature to achieve a majority vote to block legislation. That's because the government would have to secure the votes of at least eight elected members to tip the balance in its favor. According to this criterion, the legislatures in the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Oman have minimal autonomy, if any.

By inducing a political culture that prompts ministers to work more closely with an elected body, the power to dismiss ministers is another indicator of legislative power. Legislatures in Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar are able to call a vote of confidence to remove ministers — Kuwait's parliament leads in its power to dismiss ministers with a majority vote from its 50 elected members. Bahrain's parliament requires only a two-thirds vote from the elected lower house.

Removing a Qatari minister would require a two-thirds vote from the entire 45-legislator body. That would effectively require any attempt to remove a minister in Qatar to have the support of all elected members, a possible but not probable scenario. In Oman, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the councils can summon ministers but cannot dismiss them.

Qatar's legislature may encounter some early tests

As analysts have pointed out, GCC governments have many creative ways to cloak authoritarianism with a veneer of participatory politics. They have several ways to influence electoral outcomes: eligibility restrictions on who can stand for a seat or even vote, and the engineering of electoral districts, as well as the range of specific policies legislatures have the authority to address.

As Qatar's Shura Council convenes, it will be interesting to see how the executive branch will balance its power with the new legislative body. It appears Qatar's parliament will focus more on general government policies rather than issues deemed security-related or affecting Qatar's economic viability. Some may see this as a way to avoid the dysfunctional policymaking experienced in Kuwait, while others may view this approach as a mechanism to limit the power of the legislative branch.

One early test case may be a debate about inclusive citizenship. The electoral law issued in July provoked a wide-reaching and intense national discourse on who is eligible to vote and run for office. The new law stated that Qataris who have either an "original" nationality or a Qatari-born grandfather are granted the right to vote. However, to run for office, they would have to be considered "original" Qataris. According to interpretations of the constitution and the Nationality Law of 2005, this classification is limited to those who are descendants of Qataris who lived in the country before 1930 and continued to live there. Qatari citizens who do not meet those criteria are challenging the exclusionary definition.

Establishing an elected legislative body in Qatar is a major milestone in terms of political participation. This move could serve as a gateway for the nation's political culture to evolve, presenting an opportunity for citizens to have more of an interdependent relationship with their government.

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Dania Thafer (@Dr_DaniaThafer) is executive director of Gulf International Forum, an institute focused on the political, social and economic dynamics of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Iraq, Iran and Yemen. She is also a professorial lecturer at Georgetown University, and her area of expertise is on the politics of the six GCC countries.